WE MUST CELEBRATE THE EASTER NIGHT

by

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We Must Celebrate The Easter Night

Yes, certainly. We must celebrate the Easter night. The Holy Father didn't give this great gift to Christendom for nothing! The great, liturgical experiment that he ordered to be made has its profound meaning and purpose. It most decidedly is no toy to play with.

Why, precisely, must we celebate the Easter night? Because it used to be custom? No, not for that reason. At least not in the first place. We must celebrate the Easter night above all *out of a lively sense of pastoral responsibility.*

Sacramenta propter Homines

Formerly, in fact until the time of Pope Urban VIII (d.1633), the days of Holy Week and also the days of Easter Week were ecclesiastical holidays. But the world keeps rolling along, and whatever has to do with the Church, with God, is always being pushed more into the background. The demands of daily life seem to multiply to an alarming degree. The massing of men in factories and big office buildings, the frightful concentration of modern industries, all conspire to compress modern man inescapably into the narrow confines of work, of making a living.

How many Christians, even with the best of will, simply cannot find the time nowadays to go to morning Mass or to church! Why is it that just recently the Holy See has finally issued a general decree about "evening Masses" (the Apostolic Constitution *Christus Dominus* of January 6, 1953)? The fact is that today the majority of Christians, not only in cities but also in the country, have *more* time in the evening than in the morning.

And the Church must accommodate herself to the people! The Church exists for souls! That means, Masses in the evening. That means, the great ceremonies of the Easter Vigil, which since centuries have been observed in the morning, must be transferred again to the evening, to the time of night when the people can take part.

Restoration, not Innovation

Of course, one can expect all sorts of objections against this "innovation." Anything new is resented by the creature of habit called man. It may be due to sloth of spirit, or often just a love of ease. As a matter of fact, there is no question in this case of any "innovation," but, more exactly, only of a *restoration* of the ancient, original state of things. The Church for centuries was concerned to celebrate precisely the "Easter night" — the great, glorious "full vigil," the *"Pannychis,"* the solemn nightwatch — in order that Christ might not find his Bride sleeping (cf. Matt. 25:6).

The gradual anticipation of the hour, first to the time of evening, then to the afternoon, and finally to the morning of Holy Saturday was due chiefly to the fact that, when adult baptisms ceased, the most important part of the Vigil celebration, namely the baptism itself, dropped out; and as a consequence the other parts of the service also gradually lost their profound meaningfulness. People lost their understanding of how things belonged together; the Easter Vigil became just another church ceremony — as so many others. It was therefore pushed to the morning — like the others.

If then today, as has already been said, the hours of morning are in the case of many Catholics impossible for church services, and especially for lengthy ones — because the rhythm of their daily work and life has become different — a return to the older practice of a night-celebration would seem fully justified.

"It Burdens Priest and People"

"But why impose upon people the *burden* of a night-service?" Our times, unfortunately, have become strangely unwilling to make sacrifices; but perhaps chiefly when there is question of the Church, or of the Lord. Let a major event be advertised, a boxing match between two well-known fighters, let us say, and it is remarkable how we are willing without batting an eye to sacrifice time, money, comfort and a lot of other things. How many sacrifices, often serious sacrifices, doesn't modern life demand on hundreds on occasions! We make them; it simply has to be. But if we are asked, once a year, to make a sacrifice for the Lord God, for the benefit and well-being of our own soul, is that too much?

"But such a night-service will *over-burden the priest.* As it is, he doesn't know any more which way to turn." — The new order need not prove an additional burden to the priest; his burden will simply be transferred to another time of day. It will be better distributed. The whole morning will be free. And the regulations of the new Vigil, the *"Ordinationes,"* explicitly direct that the unreasonable pastoral burdens, e.g., the crowds of confessions precisely on Holy Saturday or Easter morning, should and can be better distributed through proper instruction and training of the faithful.

"Again a *new midnight Mass!"* — No, this is not just another mid-night Mass. The Easter night celebration is something totally different from the x-number of midnight Masses which have come into fashion as highlighting a congress, a mission, or other public ecclesiastical demonstrations.

The only proper place for a Vigil celebration leading up to Easter can, by the nature of the case, be no other than the night that connects Holy Saturday with Easter Sunday. There was a time when the faithful "vigiled," that is, watched and prayed the *whole* night through. Today we wouldn't have the courage and strength for that, very likely. For that reason, too, the celebration has been abbreviated. But its *"position"* is the time of mid-night, when the Saturday, the day of our Lord's resting in the grave, flows into the Sunday, the day of our Lord's resurrection.

There is question, here, of facts of the story of redemption: of co-experiencing the redemptive events at their *true* time of happening. It was only with considerable reluctance that the Sacred Congregation of Rites acceded to multiple requests by permitting also a *"substitute time"* for *cases of necessity,* on the evening of Holy Saturday: but only as an exception, only for very weighty reasons of a public character, and only in individual cases. The *normal* time is and remains night-time, the junction of Saturday and Sunday.

The Easter night Mass is not just a midnight Mass, such for instance as that of Christmas, for which the Church decided to celebrate the birth of our Lord in the middle of the night; it is a *nightwatch,* abbreviated to a few hours around midnight in order thus to safeguard the full meaning and nature of the celebration.

Once a year it should be possible to ask something special of our faithful; sacrifices are not made except for what is treasured.

The Day of Baptism

Far more is involved in the celebration of the Easter night than a nice candle light service!

We must celebrate the Easter night because we must again awaken the *baptism-consciousness* of Christians. The Christian of the ancient Church, who received baptism as a mature person, possessed such a baptism-consciousness. He had been a pagan, he had lived in his world which from childhood had seized upon him, in his home, in public life, in his religious practices, which had, in a word, shaped and fashioned his whole mentality and being. He had lived convinced of the rightness of such a way of life, or at least it had become a matter of deeply rooted habit.

Christianity had torn him loose from his normal life-habits, from his whole outlook on life. As a candidate for baptism he had to find his way into an entirely new world, often enough he had to battle his way through and into it, at the cost of great hardship. He entered upon a hundred and a thousand points of opposition to his former world. He knew what he was called upon to relinquish, what he had to sacrifice. He knew what was awaiting him, what would be demanded of him. Especially in the era of persecutions!

During Lent, the last forty days before the great decisive step, he was slowly but with inexorable logic prayed out of heathenism, he was "exercised" (not only "exorcised") out of his former ways. And in the great, holy night before Easter he, with Christ, celebrated death and resurrection, through baptism; he experienced a dying and a new becoming, in a measure and in a realness not only mental but also in full reality of truth, of which in our day only a convert can have any inkling. Certainly not the ordinary cradle-Catholic, who from earliest childhood has grown up into his faith as into the most matter-of-fact thing in the world.

The majority of Christians today lack the great and unique, the life-transforming baptismal experience. Hence so many Christians by habit, so many nominal Christians; hence so little strength and "punch," so little solid conviction. Christian life is, for very many,

not something that has been "achieved," that has been won through struggle, but something which simply fell into their laps. Hence the failure on wide fronts, not of Christianity, but of many Christians.

Renewing Baptismal Consciousness

"But we can't re-baptize all these Christians!" — True, but we can bring to life for them the fact of baptism in a new and emphatic manner. Such is the purpose of the Easter night celebration.

The mere blessing of water, which after all had its true and original meaning only in the solemn conferring of baptism that followed, can hardly be expected to exercise any renovative power; certainly not if, as has been customary, it be performed in some far corner of the church, and usually to empty benches. At all events, the new Easter night service takes it out of obscure corners and places it in the center of things; and then it can become indeed a veritable revelation for the majority of the congregation. They had no idea how beautiful, how rich, how full of meaning this blessing of baptismal water really is.

But the blessing of water is now, in the new rite, followed with logical necessity by the solemn, communal and public renewal of baptismal vows. It is a fresh, communal and public protestation of loyalty to Christ, to the Church, to the faith, to a life lived by faith. A public rite, binding together all participants. Each vows and promises for himself, but also in full awareness that he is co-responsible for the others. Christianity is not merely personal, it is also collective. For that reason the renewal of the baptismal vows closes with the congregationally recited Our Father: all pray for the one, and one prays for all.

In this way the Easter night celebration should and intends to stir up again a proper baptism-consciousness, one that awakens awareness of solemn obligation. The Christian is to be roused to a new, strong and operative life-decision; he is to make this decision, and live by it.

What a splendid task of pastoral effectiveness this Easter night celebration can become!

Gives Meaning to Lent

We must celebrate the Easter night because we must bring to life again the *meaning and purpose of Lent.* It is completely wrong

to think that Lent has become outmoded or has lost its meaning for modern daily life. On the contrary! Today more than ever Lent has a great mission to fulfill.

What, after all, is essential to the period of Lent? Whoever regards Lent as merely a time of *bodily* fasting, in other words, as a time of abstinence from meat and a time of mortification, thinks of it in far too material, far too narrow a fashion. Lent was, according to the purpose and in the practice of the ancient Church (and this can and should be just as true today) a time of comprehensive spiritual renewal; to speak plainly, in modern terms, Lent was the *great forty day retreat of all Christendom.*

Once in his lifetime the Christian of ancient times went through the great experience of baptism. From then on, year after year, the celebration of the Easter days and the renewed observance of Lent, which once had meant a preparation for his definitive renunciation of the world and for his oath of loyalty to Christ, meant for him now an annual new awareness of his baptism-experience. Every year during Lent he observed the discipline of fasting, which in those days was very severe; but that was not all. Lent was understood to be a time of penance, of retirement, of recollection, of interior renewal, of good works, of the restoration of the full spirit of Christian living.

The Fathers of the Church, particularly St. Leo the Great, and the liturgical prayers of the season in multiple turns of expression constantly stress the one thought: that Lent is *"all-embracing"* — that it involves body and soul, abstention from all evil, all sin and all worldliness, and a renewed return to and absorption in God, in Christ, in the works of justice.

Bodily fasting is impossible for many people nowadays; our tempo of life seems to be opposed to it, and it would be a most difficult task to restore the strict fasting discipline. Nor is that essential. What is essential is the celebration of Lent in the *full spirit of the season,* as a time of conversion and intensified spiritual life. And that is possible to everyone!

Lent Today

The Easter night celebration, because it emphasizes baptism and

renewal in Christ so forcefully, thereby also gives new life and new meaning to the preceding period of Lent. Pastoral work must, accordingly, undertake an important task: to bring Lent to new life from within, to make of it again the great "retreat" for the whole Church, days of self-examination, of amendment, of renunciation, a time in which all Christians will again direct their lives away from the world and towards Christ and the Church.

Some "fasting" from the movies, from absorption in sports and television, a certain turning aside from the haste and bustle of the whole complex tumult of the modern world that deadens the spirit, mortification of the senses, of sensuality and of the passions, . . . thoroughgoing reflection on the great truths of faith — such are the tasks, such the meaning of modern Lent; and seen thus, it will never become un-modern or outmoded. On the contrary. Lent and the celebration of Easter night stand in reciprocal relation to each other. Each demands and in turn promotes the other. Both represent a new, and yet very ancient and always necessary, task of modern pastoral care.

Awareness of Christ

We must celebrate the Easter night because we must re-awaken in the faithful an *awareness* of Christ. Why is Christianity so flat, so feeble and without vigor in many baptized Christians? Why does the faith of so many Christians leave others quite indifferent? Why doesn't it sweep them off their feet? Why doesn't it rouse them to enthusiastic imitation?

Because these Catholics lack a true, profound and living awareness of Christ. They were baptized into Christ, they are called Christians, they have the vocation to bear Christ into the world, to be a leaven that penetrates all, to be salt that preserves from corruption. And yet —

Therefore it is imperative, and one of the great goals of modern pastoral work, to re-awaken an awareness of Christ; Christ must again be placed squarely and fully in the center of things, and more especially in the center of Christian hearts and lives. We stand in need of a *Christly heroism*. Else the world will never get well, mankind will not improve, and the kingdom of God will not be built.

Christ the Light

Now the new Easter nightwatch does place Christ in the center. Unobtrusively, but unmistakably. In symbols that appeal both to the child and the educated adult.

The impressive rite of blessing the Easter Candle, its progressive preparation that it become the image of Christ, is something that is immediately intelligible to all. The procession with the Easter Candle, which alone is lighted, the sole light in the darkness of night, and from which in three stages the entire congregation receives light, is a magnificent pictorial sermon about Christ.

And as a matter of fact, reports of the previous two years indicate that it was precisely this light symbolism, this receiving of light from the Candle, which made a deep and lasting impression on the faithful. Very many of them took their small candle which had been lighted from the Christ-flame home with them.

Christ as the light of the world thus again becomes familiar and intelligible to modern Christians by these simple means. And it is the most beautiful, the most exalted and the most thankful task of pastoral activity to re-direct the baptized ever and again to Christ, to lead them to Him.

True Meaning of Easter

The Easter nightwatch serves as a reminder to priests that among the multiplicity of things to which they devote so much time and energy, the one and first and greatest and most decisive task be not neglected: namely, to live Christ, to preach Christ, to make Christ come to life in the hearts of the baptized. The Easter night celebration offers pastors a major help and inspiration to this end.

We must celebrate the Easter night because we want to restore *full significance to Easter* itself, the greatest feast of Christendom. Curiously enough, many fear, and feared, that the night celebration of the Easter Vigil would harm the solemn celebration of Easter day. The opposite has happened. It is clear beyond a doubt from the official reports of bishops as well as from the many articles and other accounts that have reached us, that wherever the Easter nightwatch was celebrated, attendance at the main service on Easter Sunday did not suffer, but was in most cases increased.

And that was really to be expected. For the proper celebration of the Easter night, accompanied by a sound introduction of the faithful into the meaning of the whole Easter mystery, will awaken in them a better understanding of the true greatness, beauty and significance of Easter Sunday. Hence they will feel impelled to come to Mass again on Easter day. No, *the celebration of the new Easter Vigil does not detract from the celebration of Easter Sunday.* On the contrary: if the Vigil has been well prepared, if the faithful have been well instructed, if they have grasped the meaning of the Easter mystery in its entirety, Easter Sunday will not suffer.

Here too the basic principle of pastoral liturgy applies: *one* feast *elucidates the other; one* well-celebrated liturgical solemnity *furthers all others.* For the liturgy in its totality, the Church year in its succession of celebrations, constitutes an organically interrelated whole. Consequently, even if only one part is brought to life, it will exercise a vivifying influence also on the parts that precede and follow it.

It was therefore a decision of the highest moment when the Holy Father determined to apply the lever of official liturgical restoration to the very center of all liturgical celebration, namely, to Easter.

The Grace of Easter

If pastors succeed in bringing the feast of *Easter* to life again *in its totality* — and this would include the Easter nightwatch, and even the preceding days of Holy Week (for passion, death and resurrection belong essentially together); if they succeed in making it come truly and spiritually alive again among the Christian people, and in making it meaningful for Christian living, then there will and must stream forth from this central point, necessarily and infallibly, new operations of grace upon all the rest of the Church year, upon the whole life of the faithful. For the liturgy is, essentially, a sharing in the grace-operations of the Redemption.

It is, of course, first and basically the worship of God, the exercise of the virtue of religion. But through one of the wonderful arrangements of the divine plan of salvation, it is *at the same time* and instrumentally also a dispensation of graces and a sharing in the life of grace which has its origin in Christ the head of the Church, the Savior and Redeemer. *All liturgical ministry is therefore a minis-*

tering to the holiness of God, inasmuch as liturgy is "cult"; but it is likewise a *ministering to men,* since the liturgy is simultaneously the first and chiefest organ for dispensing grace.

Thus the Easter nightwatch, properly observed, well prepared, and worthily celebrated, is the best condition for a good spiritually fruitful celebration of Easter Sunday, the greatest feast of the Christian religion.

Restoring the Sunday

We must celebrate the Easter night because we must again bring to life and make fruitful the weekly day of the Lord, *the Sunday.* We can and should widen the scope of our hopes. The Easter nightwatch is not only meant to give new meaning and significance to Easter Sunday, but from Easter there will and must go forth a new evaluation and a new and living experience of all other Sundays of the year.

Whoever has a deeper insight into the demands and needs of modern spiritual life will know that one of the most urgent objectives of pastoral effort is the restoration of the Sunday.

Modern life is constantly and to an ever greater degree debasing Sunday from its due function, which is: to be the day of the Lord, the day of "religion," of divine service. It is not simply a day of *rest,* of recreation, of amusement, of lazily doing nothing; it is not a day specially set aside for social events, for sports or what not.

For a Christian the Sunday is and must remain above all, basically and essentially, the "day of the Lord"! *The day which belongs to God!* The day of re-creating the whole man, body *and* soul, and not only the body. The day on which all Christians fulfill their first, greatest and most exalted duty: to give to God the things that are God's.

It cannot be expressed in words, it is simply beyond telling, what blessing the proper Christian celebration of Sunday calls down not merely on the individual, but on the family as a whole, on society, on all mankind. The observance of the Sunday is the measure, the thermometer of the health of Christian life.

Hence in these days, when attacks on the Sunday have so multiplied that many, all too many, are hardly conscious any more that they are taking place, the sanctification of the Sunday and the restoring of its genuinely Christian celebration has become one of

the chief concerns of pastoral zeal. A number of large and well-planned congresses of pastors and practical liturgists have in these past few years therefore taken up the problem of sanctifying the Sunday (St. Louis, 1949; Maria Laach, Paris, Padua, 1951; Luxemburg, Strasbourg, 1952, to mention but a few).

Sunday a "Little Easter"

Now the Sunday, the ordinary (the *so-called* "ordinary") Sunday, is nothing else than a *continuation and repetition of the Easter celebration.* On a Sunday the Lord arose from the grave, on Easter Sunday morning He completed His triumph over death, sin and hell, on a Sunday He visibly established His Church by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and thereby guaranteed His redemptive work for the duration of the world. The Sunday, *every* Sunday, is first of all the "day of the Lord," of Him who for us died and arose from the dead, whose resurrection, according to the testimony of St. Paul, is the central message of the Church's glad tidings.

The idea of celebrating the Holy Trinity on Sunday was quite unknown to the ancient Church; it arose only in the middle ages, and not until 1759 was the Trinity preface prescribed for the Sundays of the year! It represents a disarrangement of the Sunday mystery which is bound to have its effect also in the life of the Christian.

We must insist on the fact that the Sunday is a constantly recurring "little Easter." A weekly recalling of the foundation of our Christian existence, of Christ's death and resurrection which are the dual basic mysteries of our faith, must somehow again become a living awareness every Sunday. Christ the "Lord," the King, the Conqueror, He who has completed the work of salvation stands in our midst every Sunday, His gospel is proclaimed anew every Sunday, and every Sunday the faithful should receive His sacrificed and now glorious body in the communally celebrated sacrifice of the Mass.

Whoever brings the feast of Easter to life, whoever vitalizes for the faithful the great and holy Easter celebration in its full dimensions and in the full depth of its mysteries, will thereby also prepare the way for a new and fitting observance of the Sunday. For Easter necessarily casts its radiance upon each and every Sunday.

Here indeed is a pastoral work that is modern — and demanded by the needs of the times!

THE EASTER VIGIL

by

Decrees of the Sacred Congregation of Rites

February 9, 1951
January 11, 1952

1. **Who may use the restored EASTER VIGIL rite?**
   Parish churches, cathedrals, chapels — all who are privileged to use the ordinary Holy Saturday rite may use this restored Vigil instead, with their bishop's permission.

2. **Why did Pope Pius XII make this change?**
   There are three principal reasons:

   a) **The very nature of the service,** its whole spirit and content demand observance during the night preceding Christ's resurrection from the dead. In fact, this "Vigil" is the real resurrection service and the original Easter Mass.

   b) **To help the people** understand better by letting them see, intelligently follow, and take active part in the celebration. This rite is obviously a more sincere, a more realistic service for modern conditions.

   c) **So that many more parishioners may be present.** Holy Saturday morning services are usually attended by very few; a night hour would make possible a larger attendance of working people.

3. **When is the Vigil to be celebrated?**
   It is to begin at such a time (about 10:30 p.m.) that Mass will start at about midnight. The bishop may permit an earlier time if he judges there is a serious reason: but not before 8:00 p.m.

4. **What are some of the main differences in the new rite?**
   a) All the ceremonies are to be done where the people can see them, and the people are to take active part by answering responses, holding lit candles, and, above all, by renewing their baptismal vows after the blessing of the baptismal water.
   b) There is a beautiful addition to the blessing of the Easter Candle, consecrating time and seasons to Christ. The triple-branched candle is not used. The symbolism is simplified and made more clear.
   c) The prophecies are reduced from 12 to 4.
   d) The blessing of the Easter and baptismal water takes place in the middle of the Litany of the Saints. This litany is not doubled.
5. **What about Holy Saturday morning?**
   No services: Christ is "resting" in the grave.
6. **When was this revised rite first announced?**
   On February 9, 1951, the Congregation of Rites granted it for 1951; a second Decree dated January 11, 1952 extends permission through 1954. It is expected that it will then be mandated or again extended for optional use.
7. **Does the new legislation affect the Divine Office?**
   Yes. Since the Vigil is itself the night-worship, Compline and Matins drop out. Lauds is one psalm and canticle at the end of Mass. The Easter Office begins with Prime.
8. **What about priests who ordinarily binate on Sunday?**
   They may celebrate the Vigil Mass and as many Masses on Easter Sunday as they otherwise would; they may binate or trinate according to their faculties.
9. **Is there a modification of the fasting law for priests who say another Mass on Easter morning?**
   Yes. After saying the midnight Vigil Mass, a priest may take liquid nourishment up to one hour before the next Mass.
10. **How often may the faithful receive Holy Communion?**
    Once a day: if they receive on Holy Saturday — whether in the morning or evening — they may receive again on Easter Day; if the Mass is at midnight, they may not receive again.

11. **Regulations on Communion fast for the faithful?**

For midnight service, the faithful must fast from 10:00 p.m. on; if the service is earlier Saturday evening, from 7:00 p.m.

12. **Does attendance at the Vigil fulfill the precept of Sunday Mass attendance?**

Yes, if a midnight service. And judging by experience so far, the majority will return for another Mass on Easter Day itself.

13. **Does the Decree provide for the flood of confessions on Holy Saturday night?**

. . . *studeat parochus fidelibus suadere . . . ad confessiones . . . in diversis diebus distributis* . . . The Decree suggests that pastors urge the people to come on other days earlier in Holy Week. This *is* a problem, but a solution can be obtained by careful foresight and provision — as in the case of Christmas Eve.

14. **Have there been any "practical" advantages in using this restored rite?**

The 1952 Decree comments that wherever it was used in 1951, it was *optimo cum successu*. American and European bishops and priests report increasing attendances in 1952 and 1953, and a marked atmosphere of sincere devotion on the part of the people. If the people were instructed, the service proved to be a major religious experience for them. All who used it have praised it, and thank our Holy Father for restoring the Easter Vigil to us.

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS ISSUED BY THE CONGREGATION OF RITES IN 1952

1. During Lent, the people are to be instructed concerning the ceremonies of the Vigil and prepared to renew their baptismal vows. This is especially stressed in the Decree. There should also be due preparation of necessary items, servers, choir, ceremony practice, etc., to assure devout and reverent observance.
2. The restored Vigil rite may be used as an evening service

only; if a pastor chooses to keep the morning schedule, he uses the ordinary Holy Saturday rite.

3. Wherever the restored Vigil is used, there is no need to repeat the prophecies, blessings, etc., on the Vigil of Pentecost. On that day the priest simply begins with the Mass itself.
4. The Lenten fast ceases Saturday noon, even if the new Vigil service is used.
5. Bishops who celebrate the Vigil may pontificate again on Easter morning, although they are not obliged to do so.

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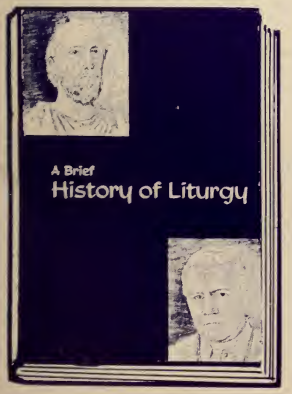

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